

AN ACCOUNT OF THE INEFFABLE
MIRACLE WROUGHT BY THE HOLY AND
AUGUST ICON OF OUR ALL-HOLY LADY
THE THEOTOKOS OF CASSIOPE FOR THE
UNJUSTLY-BLINDED - STEPHEN WHO
WONDROUSLY RECEIVED EYES AGAIN.



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This miracle is commemorated on May 8.

*A certain woman seeth her son with eyes today, Yet she beheld him not
with those eyes wherewith he saw before. On the eighth of May God's
Mother gave eyes to the blind man.*

When Simon Leone Balbi was governor of Corfu, in the year of our salvation 1530, a youth named Stephen was returning from the city to his village, having accomplished his purpose. On the way, he encountered other wayfarers with whom he walked together. At some distance from the city they encountered certain youths who were returning from the mill bringing with them flour. Whereupon Stephen's fellow travelers, because they were vile men and of evil counsel, said, "What hinders us from taking this flour and dividing it among ourselves? No one will see us."

But Stephen, being a just man, as soon as he heard these things, endeavored to hinder them as much as he could with many admonishments, saying that this which they were plotting to do was a beastly thing, and that if they did it they would not escape just punishment as thieves and evil-doers. But they, like asps, stopping up their ears (Ps. 57:4), would not listen, rather they even attempted to convince Stephen to become an accomplice to the robbery. He, on his part, would in no wise consent to this. Whereupon, having first beaten the youths, they seized the flour and proceeded to their homes rejoicing. The youths, on their part, when they returned home empty-handed and weeping, related to their relatives what had happened. And they, searching diligently, ascertained who the thieves were and reported the deed to the ruler.

Stephen was also accused together with the thieves, since the victims had seen him in their company, yet they did not know that he had tried to hinder them and that he had not aided them in any way. Those that were guilty of the theft, knowing their guilt, hid in order not to be apprehended and be punished as was meet. But Stephen, since he was innocent, went to the city without any fear. Hence, when he approached, he was recognized and arrested by the soldiers of the ruler and cast into prison. Afterwards, he was led bound before the governor for interrogation. On being questioned, he told the whole truth, that is, that he was walking together with the thieves, but that he took no part in the robbery and that he was unjustly accused. But in vain did he strive to convince the ruler. The words of the just Stephen appeared to the judge as false, for the judge thought him to be a thief and like the others.

Judged guilty unjustly, therefore, by the governor, the innocent Stephen was called upon to choose which punishment he preferred, the privation of his eyes or the cutting off of his hands. And because the punishment of the privation of his eyes seemed lighter to Stephen, he chose this. Whereupon, leading him weeping and mourning to the customary place of punishment, they gouged out his eyes in the presence of many people. After he was blinded, his mother, weeping and lamenting, brought him to the church of St. Lazarus in order to seek alms.

But most of the people in that place mocked and reproached him as one who had justly suffered punishment, that as a thief he forcefully took what did not belong to him. On the other hand, since they who took compassion on him were few indeed, he thought according to divine providence, of course to go with his mother to the church of the Theotokos which was in the village of Cassiope, by the sea, and which was at a distance of eighteen miles from the city of Corfu. In this church there is found the wonderworking icon of the Theotokos, and having an adequate quay outside the church, the boats would all moor there out of reverence for the all-holy Theotokos. It is at this place that Stephen thought to go and ask for alms from those who came to reverence

the holy icon of the Theotokos. His mother also agreed to this. They went, therefore, to the church of the Mother of God, and after worshipping as was proper, with laments and sighs they recounted to the monk that was there the unjust misfortune which they had suffered and the reason why they betook themselves there. They also asked for a small cell in which to stay. He replied that until the brother who had the keys for the cells returned (for he was absent); they could stay in the church. Stephen's mother, exhausted as she was from the journey, reclined and fell asleep immediately.

But Stephen, unable to sleep because of his pains, fell asleep only a little and very lightly at that. During the night O thy marvels, most holy Theotokos! — he felt hands touching him and pressing against his eyes so much that he awoke crying out loudly and wondering who it was that had touched him so firmly. Beholding a certain Lady resplendent and full of light, who disappeared in a few moments, he thought to himself that it was a dream and not real. But on turning, he saw the icon lamps lit and he marveled greatly, and was perplexed concerning how and what it was that had taken place. Awakening his mother, he said to her, "Who lit the lamps?" She on her part, thinking that her son was seeing a delusion in his sleep, began to weep and told him to be quiet and go to sleep. "Woe is me," she said, "not only hath he lost his eyes, but now he hath lost his mind also from the shock and pain, and, though being without eyes, he saith that he seeth."

But Stephen would not listen, and insisted that he actually saw' the lamps, and even the holy icon of the Mother of God, and that what he was saying was not of his fancy. Then he related to her what had happened to him a little earlier, and that he had called out to her, but that she did not hear him because she had been sound asleep. His mother, therefore, perceived that this must be a divine manifestation. Whereupon, she arose immediately, and gazing carefully at the face of Stephen, she observed that truly he had eyes and that whereas formerly he had had dark eyes, he now had blue eyes. Wherefore, from the great, joy and awesome fear which overcame her she began to shout loudly and to weep, glorifying God and calling continually upon the name of the

most-glorious Mother of God. Both she and her son began to clap their hands and to magnify the all-holy Theotokos.

Hearing the shouts and the clamor, and because it was before the appointed time of arising for the services, the monk who took care of the church became angry and began to reproach them as unruly and evil people, adding that they had been justly punished as such; but Stephen and his mother only continued shouting and relating the marvels of God. The monk, astonished and disbelieving because of the greatness of the miracle, came down into the church. He then beheld him who but a little before had been blind, now having eyes and seeing. Wherefore he departed immediately for the city. Finding the governor Balbi in the court house, he cried out against him, and accused him of being lawless. But those present attempted to expel the monk, saying to him, "it is not lawful to dare with such audacity to confront those which are in authority, and to be haughty and high-minded in such a manner." He, on his part, shouted even more so, saying, "If Stephen had not been unjustly blinded by him, God would not have given him other eyes through the intercession of the Theotokos!" On hearing this, the governor sent certain notables, who, on their return, reported that the words of the monk were true. Then Balbi, accompanied by notables, went himself to the shrine, by means of the governor's caravel, and all beheld with their own eyes this great miracle and, as was meet, they marveled greatly.

But the governor Balbi still entertained a doubt, thinking that it was not Stephen himself whom he saw, or that he had not truly been blinded, even as the Jews also had similar doubts concerning the blind man to whom our Lord Jesus Christ gave eyes. The greatness of the miracle did not permit the governor and certain others to accept it immediately. On returning to the city, therefore, Balbi called the executioner and said to him; "Did you take out Stephen's eyes even as I had ordered?" The executioner verified then that indeed he had blinded him, and that the eyes which had been gouged out were still in the bucket, since it had been only the day before that he had done it. He went, therefore, and brought the eyes. When the governor saw them, he believed that the miracle was genuine, especially since he saw that the eyes

were of a hue different from those which Stephen had received anew. It should also be noted that on Stephen's face there were still evident the wounds of the iron implement by which his eyes had been gouged out.

This, of course, happened by divine providence, so that the miracle might be proclaimed and be believed in as indisputable, that is, by the scars and the different color of the eyes. For if the eyes had been of the same hue, many might have said that they were the same eyes and that they had not been taken out. In this manner, therefore, the miracle was reported throughout all of Corfu and was believed by all. Then Balbi called Stephen and asked his forgiveness for the injustice which he had inflicted upon him out of ignorance. Rewarding him with goodly gifts and attending to him with much kindness, he sent him immediately to his home. Afterwards, the governor was very diligent to renovate the courtyard of the church and to embellish the shrine of the Mother of God at Cassiope.

Many who at that time had doubts about the Orthodox Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ were made steadfast through this extraordinary and ineffable miracle. Beholding what had taken place and had been demonstrated in their own time, they came to believe in those things which are mentioned in the Divine Scriptures and which are usually believed in by hearing alone. As for those who remained in unbelief and would not honor this ineffable miracle, they were put to shame, for having eyes in order to see, even as the holy Prophet Ezekiel says, they saw not, and having ears to hear, they heard not.

Let us all run, therefore, with faith and piety to the luminous Virgin and Theotokos Mary, and let us beseech her as one who has audience, that she may illumine the eyes of our understanding, lest we walk in the darkness of unbelief and sin, and that she may intercede with God Who was born of her, to rescue us from every temptation of the evil one and deem us worthy of the celestial kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom is due all glory, thanksgiving, honor, and worship, with His Father Who is without beginning, and the All-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen

The above miracle was translated from *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints* in Greek, and the information that follows was taken from the book *The Most Holy Theotokos of Cassiopia, Kerkyra*, 1968, by Protopresbyter Athanasios H. Tsitsa.

Translator's Note

The village of Cassiope is located on the northeastern tip of the island of Corfu (Kerkyra in Greek), just eighteen miles up the coast from the main port and capital, the city of Kerkyra. On a clear day, towards the east, one can see opposite the village the coast of Albania at the place called Agioi Saranda (Holy Forty, i.e., the Martyrs of Sebaste). In Roman times there existed at this place a city named Cassiope with a shrine dedicated to Cassius Jupiter. After the Christianization of the island, a church dedicated to the Theotokos was built on the ruins of the pagan temple. For many centuries now the church has celebrated its patron feast on the feast of the Life-giving Spring (Friday of New Week).

After the above-mentioned miracle and the embellishment of the church by the Venetian Governor Simon Leone Balbi, the church was destroyed in 1537 during the unsuccessful siege of Corfu by the Turks, who ravaged the coastline. Shortly afterwards, it was rebuilt, and in 1590 further extended by Nicholas Suriano, the Admiral of the Venetian Fleet. It seems that in the same year, the church was taken over by the Latins and converted into a Roman Catholic shrine. Thus, the church and the wonderworking icon were in the possession of the Roman Catholic Venetian authorities for some length of time (possibly two centuries). Witnesses to this are two remaining side altars and the apses of six more in the church today.

During this period, the wonderworking icon was transferred to the capital (according to some, this happened right after the miracle; by order of the Governor Balbi) and placed in the Latin church of Tenedos. The icon was there until 1797, in which year the French took over the island and returned the icon to the Orthodox. It was then decided to keep the icon in the capital for

safekeeping, since the city was fortified, whereas Cassiope was open to the sea. Accordingly, the icon was kept in the 14th century church of the Archangel Michael, which at that time was the cathedral. It was there until the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1940 when, for further safekeeping, the icon was transferred to the Metropolitan's residence. This proved providential, for on November 26, 1940, the church of the Archangel Michael was destroyed during the Italian bombardment of the island. On April 13, 1967, the icon was returned in procession to the shrine of Cassiope.

The icon is of the type known in the Orthodox Church as the *Unfading Rose*, for the Holy Mother of God is depicted holding a rose in her right hand. The inspiration for this type of icon is taken from the hymn chanted in the first ode of the canon for the Saturday of the Akathist during the period of the Triodion. The hymn begins with the words "Rejoice, O thou only one who blossomed forth the Unfading Rose." This canon is ascribed to St. Joseph the Hymnographer who lived in the ninth century and is commemorated on April 3 in the Church calendar. The icon itself is covered by a chased silver covering and a multitude of offerings, thus only the faces of the Saviour and the Theotokos of the original painting can be seen.

From the delicacy of its features, one is tempted to ascribe the icon to the Paleologian period of icon painting, but it might be earlier. If the silver covering was removed and the icon cleaned, it might prove to be from the earlier Comenine period.

In 1976, accompanied by the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Annunciation of Oinoussai, and one nun, and the archdeacon of our monastery, we visited the island of Corfu to venerate the incorrupt holy relics of our holy Father Spyridon of Tremythus, the Wonderworker. This we did with much awe and reverence, venerating also the incorrupt relics of St. Theodora, the Empress who restored the Holy Icons. The relics of St. Spyridon are enshrined in the church dedicated to him. Those of St. Theodora are enshrined in the cathedral. The holy relics of both these saints were brought to Corfu by the same noble family of

Constantinople which fled from that hapless city on the eve of its fall to the Turks in 1453.

We also visited the church of the Holy Apostles Jason and Sospater and worshipped at their holy tombs. These holy apostles are the evangelizers of Corfu. The church has many precious icons, and is itself a monument of the Byzantine period.

Having visited a few other shrines in the city of Kerkyra, I expressed the desire to visit Cassiope and the shrine of the Mother of God there. I had read the miracle in the *Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints* in Greek when I was a young monk, and was always moved by it. In the above-mentioned account it said that the wonderworking icon had disappeared after it was taken by the Latins and its whereabouts was unknown. Our host, a native of the island, affirmed the same, i.e., that the icon was no longer at Cassiope. But I persisted, saying that just to visit and pray where such a miracle had taken place would in itself be rewarding: whereupon we all went by car to Cassiope. What joy and jubilation awaited us when we entered the church and found the icon enshrined on the right side in front of one of the two altars which have remained since the Latin occupation of the church. We chanted the supplicatory canon to the Holy Mother of God and the Akathist and kissed the icon with tears. It was at this time that our host took a few photographs of the icon which consequently served as the model for the icon which was later painted by the nuns of the Convent of the Annunciation of Oinoussai, and which is enshrined presently at the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston.

The commemoration of this great miracle of the Cassiope Mother of God is on May 8, the feast of St. John the Theologian and St. Arsenius the Great. It is celebrated greatly at Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston, where the special service commemorating the miracle is chanted along with the other services of the day.

It should be noted that the miracle wrought by our Savior when He opened the eyes of the "man which was blind from his birth" as recorded in the Gospel of St. John, chapter nine, was not — according to St. Basil the Great and other commentators — a

miracle which was performed over a man who was born with eyes and could not see, but rather over one who was born without eyes — not just blind, but eyeless. Therefore, later, when he who was formerly blind and his parents were questioned and re-questioned by the Pharisees, he said, "Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind." There were blind men who were healed in the Old Testament as also in the New Testament. But that which was truly astounding in this instance and which, "since the world began was it not heard" is that one born without physical eyes (blind) should now have eyes and see. St. Basil says that when our Savior spat on the ground, He made clay eyes of the spittle and put them in the empty sockets of the blind man, and later, when the blind man washed in the pool of Siloam those clay eyes became living eyes. This same miracle was repeated at the shrine of the Cassiope Mother of God when Stephen, whose eyes had been taken out, was gifted with a new set of eyes. Truly marvelous is God in His works!

P.P.